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PROGRAM CBS Evening News

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CBS Network

DATE April 4, 1983 7:00 P.M.

CITY Washington, D.C.

SUBJECT Nicaragua Incidents

DAN RATHER: Nicaragua today claimed that Honduran-based Nicaraguan rebels have suffered heavy casualties in the past few days: 400 rebel casualties in just one battle, a Nicaraguan military commander said.

The rebels launched some new operations into Nicaragua last month. The Sandinista government calls this an invasion-by-proxy by the United States, and is making the most of it.

Richard Wagner reports.

RICHARD WAGNER: Among the Nicaraguan military, there's overwhelming belief the fighting here could not be going on without massive United States support for the anti-government fighters.

In a clash near the Honduran border on Easter weekend, five rebels were killed by Sandinista troops. Some of the dead men were carrying United States-made equipment. But one government soldier claimed all the captured gear, including Belgian, German and Chinese weapons, had been supplied to the anti-Sandinistas by the United States.

Climb the chain of command and the rhetoric escalates. At the government's most recent news conference, Defense Minister Humberto Ortega denounced what he called growing aggressive military expansionism of the Reagan Administration from Honduran territory against the Nicaraguan people. And Foreign Minister Miguel D'Escoto, a Catholic priest, said the United States is waging war against Nicaragua.

All that's heavy-duty verbiage against what's been

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called the war that never was because of the low level of fighting. Which raises the question: Why is the Nicaraguan government saying it? The most persistent reason given by observers here is an economic one. The Nicaraguan economy is a disaster. It's been almost four years now since the revolution, and the great promise of economic progress has not been fulfilled. Without Soviet fiscal assistance here, there might well not be a Nicaraguan economy.

So, some opinion has it, in the face of growing unrest among the people and dissatisfaction over unkept revolutionary pledges, what better way to rally the population than to unite it against the threat of Yankee imperialism.

As these pictures, shot for CBS News by a free-lance crew, indicate, there seems to be little doubt the anti-Sandinista forces based in Honduras are receiving U.S.-made equipment. And some rebel leaders say they're getting money and training from the United States.

But, at this point, there would seem to be equally little doubt the Nicaraguans, with the largest army in Central America and support from the Soviet Union, are capable of meeting the challenge. If so, much of the superheated condemnation of the United States currently being heard in Nicaragua may well be for domestic consumption.